



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

## PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS

---

### IS THE ABSTRACT UNREAL?

WE frequently hear to-day statements like this: such and such a thing is an abstraction only, not a real thing. This has been said of scientific laws, of mathematical concepts, of such entities as force and matter, of thinking, feeling, acting, of anything objective or subjective, the external physical world or the psychical world. Indeed nothing is sure of escaping this metaphysical condemnation, except the great whole of the universe, which perhaps is too unwieldy for us to profit much by its reality.

Against an accusation like this one feels at first as helpless as the innocent victim accused of witchcraft in Salem. There seems to be no way of defending oneself, because, whatever one says, he is liable to be told that his very words are abstract and general and therefore do not represent the facts as they really are, the living concrete whole of experience. And this may apply to the last words as well as to anything else. *Life, whole, experience, concrete*, these must suffer the same fate as any other words. The doctrine that the abstract is unreal carries with it a belief in the inherent faultiness of the human mind. We congratulate ourselves to-day on having outlived the mediæval asceticism which taught that the body vilified all spiritual impulses; but is it not as bad or worse to teach that the mind, with a taint of original sin, perverts and falsifies the real by thinking about it? Surely the modern philosopher, however committed by his words to this view, would be secretly pleased to regard every correctly formed description of what we observe in the external world as finally true so far as it goes. Incomplete it may be, but must we add to this the vice of misrepresentation?

Moreover, it is a curious fact, which tends to arouse a little suspicion, that the most ardent defenders of this view, those 'scientific' philosophers of whom Professor Pearson seems to be the type, who profess at every turn their scorn of metaphysics and metaphysical abstractions, grasp eagerly at the support given them by this most Hegelian of Hegel's doctrines. If the enemies of metaphysics welcome such a view, is it not time for the metaphysician to examine its nature?

Such are the motives which lead me to undertake an examination of the doctrine that the abstraction is, as such, unreal. I shall try to show that the doctrine is based on a very elementary mistake in reasoning; that there is no logical basis for asserting that an isolated thing once given to us as part of a whole, can not exist *unchanged* in complete independence of that whole; and that, on the other hand, there is strong evidence that such a thing *can* so exist. The argument will have two parts: the first part will try to show that our more or less abstract description of particular sense-facts does not disagree with these facts, has no misrepresentation or contraction in it, though it is often only partial;<sup>1</sup> and the second, that the parts abstracted may and probably do exist sometimes in isolation, and that therefore in such cases the abstraction by itself is just as real as the whole from which it is abstracted.

In the first part I shall criticize Mr. Bradley's argument<sup>2</sup> that abstract description falsifies the particulars of sense, as his seems to me the most straightforward defense of this view in English. Mr. Bradley brings up the issue in discussing analytic judgments of sense (*e. g.*, 'this apple is red'). He accuses them of falsity because they are partial and abstract. He says:<sup>3</sup> 'It is never more than an arbitrary selection which goes into the judgment.' 'We sunder and divide what appears to us as a sensible whole.' 'It is precisely this coming short of fact and stating a part as if it were the whole which makes the falseness of the analytic judgment.' What appears is  $X = abcdefgh$ ; our judgment is only  $X = a$  or  $b$ . 'But  $ab$  by itself has never been given and is not what appears.' 'It was *in* the fact and we have taken it out. It was *of* the fact and we have given it independence. We have separated . . . mutilated the given.' And again,<sup>4</sup> 'It is an immense assumption to conclude when a fact comes to us as a whole that some parts of it may exist without any sort of regard for the rest.' Now of course it is false to say that a part *is* identically the same as the whole. But does a simple judgment like the above, which predicates the abstract part *red* of the whole thing *rose*, do this? If we stick to the actual words used, the judgment does no such thing. Does 'the apple is red' say explicitly, 'red is the whole of the apple, all there is about it'? If the original judgment had been, 'the apple is red and nothing more,' it would be quite different. If *red* is the same as *red only*, why keep this word *only* in our language? Or if you urge that the judgment does not indeed *say* 'only,' but implies it, the answer is a denial. If you

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Hobhouse, 'Theory of Knowledge,' Ch. on Imagination, *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> 'Principles of Logic,' Ch. II.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 95.

insist on bringing in meaning, we should all certainly say the judgment means, 'the apple is red and something else besides.' What we need here is a study of the meaning of *is*, and that study must be based on the way *is* is actually used, not on a preconceived theory that it means perfect identity. And who thinks, when judging, of making the 'immense assumption' that the red of the apple 'exists without any sort of regard for the rest'? Because we do not say it exists with the other qualities, are we to be understood to say it does exist without them? Because I did not just now say, 'there is a place called England,' do you infer that I denied England's existence? This kind of reasoning is bad logic. But formally it says, because *A* is in relation *R* with *B* it is not in relation *R* with *C*. We do not allow mathematicians, scientists and 'plain men' to reason thus—why should we allow logicians and metaphysicians? As for the 'mutilation,' you might as well say you mutilate a man when you take hold of his arm, because you do not at the same time take hold of his whole body.

The more or less abstract description of the judgment does not, then, seem to falsify or contradict what it describes. We come now to the second half of our task. Is the isolated part, aspect, or element necessarily unreal, unable to exist by itself? Here even Mr. Hobhouse, we must think, errs and falls under the sway of the traditional view. For there is the same bad logic here as in the argument of Mr. Bradley. If it is an unprovable assumption that the abstract is the whole truth, it is an equally unjustifiable assumption that the thing abstracted could not exist by itself, apart from the context which it now has. Mr. Hobhouse says,<sup>5</sup> 'the abstraction . . . can be realized only as a feature of a concrete whole;' and again,<sup>6</sup> 'what is normal and necessary is the formation of abstractions along with the knowledge that only the whole can be the reality.' And Mr. Ward also, if I understand him correctly, argues that because the external world and the scientific description are abstract aspects of experience they can have no reality apart from and independent of our experience. Let us state this reasoning formally in order to see its logical character. Call the abstracted part or aspect *A*, the rest of experience *B*, and the real *C*. Then the argument runs thus: *A* with *B* is *C*, or, if *A* is with *B* it is *C*. This we all admit, of course. Nobody denies that the whole is real; the only question is, are the parts by themselves also real? Now from the above the conclusion is drawn: if *A* is not with *B*, it is not *C*; the part *A* abstracted from its context *B* is not real. Any student of elementary logic knows better than to reason thus. What possible ground appears

<sup>5</sup> 'Theory of Knowledge,' p. 202.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 198.

for concluding that the part abstracted may not exist all alone by itself? If the context *B* were essential to the meaning of the part *A*, the case might be different, but that is a quite unjustifiable assumption. It is a curious fact that, while those who condemn the abstraction often do so on the general ground that the meaning of every fact depends on the presence and meaning of every other in the universe, they do not usually undertake to show this for particular cases. It is just when you come to particular cases that this general rule itself, again and again, is seen to be so very abstract that it cannot be made to work. In particular cases, a given part *A* often shows its character to be quite independent of its context *B*. A given physical object remains, as far as we can possibly observe, constant through many different perceptions of it. My thought of a triangle remains in many details exactly the same, as far as all empirical evidence goes, whether I am in the city, in the woods or on the sea, or in a state of abstract attention where I perceive no outer world at all. So far as we can see, a certain visual image often remains before the mind practically constant in nature throughout ever so different external surroundings. Must we not, then, say that the very meaning of that image is independent of the physical surroundings? The doctrine that the meaning of everything depends on that of everything else is, I venture to think, utterly vague speculation, incapable of proof. It is just an *a priori* assumption, whose greatest attraction is its generality. And experience shows us case after case where there is no proof of its applying, where there is revealed to observation perfect constancy in the midst of change.

We have objected so far to the logical soundness of the position that the isolated part is necessarily unreal. We have seen no *a priori* ground for such decision, and the empirical grounds urge rather the opposite conclusion. Many presentations are given to us independent of each other, each remaining constant while the rest vary; and this *suggests*—I do not say *proves*—that their mutual independence may be so thorough that each could exist alone. But even if sufficient reason has not yet been advanced to demonstrate this, we are at least warranted in saying that, on a *a priori* logical grounds, the impossibility of isolated real things cannot be demonstrated. Mr. Hobhouse's 'knowledge that only the whole can be the reality,' is just the expression of a very widespread assumption. The part is of course often in some measure affected by the whole which surrounds it, but much that is in that part remains unaltered, so far as we can see. And if it remains unaltered in different surroundings, then it *might* remain the same if all its surroundings were obliterated. To apply this to the idealistic problem: the psychical world might consistently enough be nearly what it is without any external

world, and conversely the external world might to a large extent remain unaltered by the entire disappearance of consciousness.

But there is, one must believe, another basis for the wholesale condemnation of isolated parts. We feel that the real is what is given in experience; and since external and internal, part and whole, thinking and doing, are given to us together, we feel that it would be false to say that any one of these existed apart from the rest. Matter and force are given to us bound up with motion, heat, resistance, and so we say that the former are not real things by themselves. And no doubt one must gladly welcome this tendency of modern thought to insist on completeness of view, and to search for a possible underlying unity. I am not arguing against the belief that much in nature actually presents a big general unity. I simply wish to guard against the narrowness which says that this *must* be a complete account of the matter. We have no right to conclude, because things come to us bunched together, that they have not still enough individual freedom to dissolve that union. The real is just a little larger than the present given; it includes also potencies which underlie the immediately experienced. What these potencies are, whether they display independent activities on the part of the details of the given, observation and analysis of that given alone can decide. It is simply bad logic to assume at present such a monistic view as would deny the *possibility* of many parts existing, with unchanged characters, in isolation from the wholes in which they first appeared to us. And on the other hand, there is found by observation and analysis strong evidence of the ability of many things to exist without the support of all of their environment. And even further, abstraction itself is a part of our experience. We can entertain only a limited subject-matter in our mind; the given is itself isolated, for I see but a small portion of the world with my imperfect eyesight. Yet I do not for that reason deny reality to what I see, nor should I do so if on journeying to the limits of my field of vision I found that sight failed beyond a certain circumference, where it had continued in my previous journeys over the same ground. There is, therefore, far from being in the nature of given experience any reason against the possibility of the isolated part being real; there is, perhaps, evidence in favor of that possibility. Let us, then, be more modest in our scorn of the abstraction; let us admit that the small things, the finite parts, may possibly be, in and of themselves, just as real as, besides being somewhat more useful to us than, the great whole of which they first appear to us as parts.

W. H. SHELDON.